

## **Hillside Family of Agencies Legislative Recommendations for Removing Barriers to Adoption, Statement for the Record**

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### **RE: Increasing Adoptions from Foster Care Hearing, February 27, 2013**

Celebrating its 175th anniversary in 2012, Hillside Family of Agencies is one of the oldest family and youth non-profit human services organizations in the United States. The organization provides adoption, child welfare, mental health, youth development, special education, developmental disabilities, and juvenile justice services across central and western New York and in Prince George's County, M.D. Last year, Hillside Family of Agencies provided services to 12,636 youth and families in need.

Hillside is committed to the addressing the needs of youth in out of home placement through our work in therapeutic foster care and adoption, as well as our new initiative of Family Finding through the Hillside Institute for Family Connections. Hillside currently operates two child specific recruitment grants, Wendy's Wonderful Kids through the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and Parent for Every Child, funded by the Children's Bureau. These efforts are paying off in the form of youth reconnecting with biological family and in permanent, safe, loving adoptive families for those youth who cannot return home.

In FY2010, 27,854 children aged out of the child welfare system without the permanency and connection that is so critical to development and long term well-being. The future is grim for those youth; they experience significant risk of educational failure, unplanned pregnancy, substance abuse, unemployment, criminal activity and homelessness. These issues are costly to the youth and costly to society. In addition, for every dollar spent on adoption for a child from foster care yields three dollars in benefits to society.

Research shows that a great number of families are interested in adopting a child through the child welfare system but sadly only one in 28 who contacts a child welfare agency actually adopts a child. Barriers in the system stand in the way of increasing adoption of the more than 100,000 children in foster care today, barriers which could be eliminated through changes in policy and practice. In our experience, those barriers include inaccurate data regarding the whereabouts of children in care, a lack of resources to facilitate visits between youth and prospective adoptive parents, discrimination against different kinds of families based on bias and attitude, workforce engagement issues, and a lengthy and discouraging process in terms of certification, matching and transition planning for youth.

Hillside Family of Agencies supports measures recommended by leading child advocacy organizations such as Voice for Adoption, North American Council on Adoptable Children and New York State Citizen's Coalition for Children to increase adoption and support the long term well-being of youth and families including:

1. **Encouraging interstate adoptions through changes in policy.** Institute a policy whereby interstate adoptions are eligible for an enhanced incentive payment, requiring that the sending and receiving agencies split the incentive bonuses. We are often faced with the impossible dilemma of having a match of a family we have certified with a child in another state then faced with payment for services that in no way cover the costs we incur to supervise the placement through adoption finalization. Additionally, oftentimes, state agencies are unwilling to contract for community-based services that could support the family through the typical challenges associated with adopting an older child.
2. **Create policies that encourage mental health and developmental disabilities systems to focus on the permanency needs of youth in their systems of care.** Many times, these systems seek to keep a young person safe and transition into adult care without connection to non-paid professionals. While the care is usually adequate, the lack of family denies the youth permanent lifetime connections that most of us benefit from. In some of the residential treatment facilities these youth become part of a system, essentially a number, with no one on the outside to love them, to support them, to celebrate or grieve with them.

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### 3. **Eliminate Alternative Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) as a permanency option.**

Approximately 20,000-25,000 young people age out of the foster care system each year, many without family or economic support (Allen, M. & Nixon, R., 2000). According to the 2000 Census, nearly 4 million people ages of 25-34 live with their parents due to economic realities--jobs are scarce, and housing is expensive<sup>1</sup>. Yet, the child welfare system “graduated” thousands of young people from care with no one person committed to them for a lifetime. As many as 3 in 10 of the nation's homeless adults have a history in foster care (Roman & Wolfe, 1995). These young people are at increased risk of educational failure, substance abuse, early pregnancy and criminal behavior. Clearly, the future is grim for those who age out.

### 4. **Emphasize funding for post adoption services.**

Families who adopt children open their hearts and homes to children who have experienced loss, abandonment, and other traumatic events need support to keep their children and families healthy and intact. For many families, post adoption services are an intervention to a crisis. Families receiving post adoption support through our agency view our service as a lifeline, the one thing that allowed them to keep their family whole and safe. However, post adoption services are greatly limited by lack of resources. There is not one federal funding stream devoted to post adoption services (Title IV-B subpart 2 designates a small percentage that is forced to be split, competing with the important adoption recruitment services). State and local agencies sometimes cobble together funding limited to families who are deemed income-eligible, leaving most out in the cold and program funding unstable. As we work harder and more effectively at placing children and youth with forever families, we have a moral obligation to support those families through the child's growing up years as they natural develop and work through past traumas. To not do so puts families at risk of falling apart, for children to return to care, costing states much more in the long run, and risking further trauma and tragic outcomes for youth. As the numbers of children adopted through the child welfare system continues to grow, and as long as American families continue to adopt abandoned and orphaned children from around the world, the need for a comprehensive array of post adoption services and supports becomes more critical and urgent. States and local governments need federal guidance and direction on the importance of sustaining post-adoption services for children and families.

We believe these efforts will lead to improved outcomes for children who so desperately need families as well as for those families committed to making a difference in the life of a child. On behalf of the more than 100,000 children in foster care in the United States and the families caring for adopted children from foster care, we urge you to consider the recommendations presented before you.

Respectfully Submitted,

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#### References & Resources:

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